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ABSTRACT

Washington's recently enacted Student Learning Objectives Law demands that local districts implement a program designed to provide statewide educational accountability. The law ignores the complexity of such an implementation, providing no funding, no rewards for success, no assistance or training in developing implementation techniques, and a very small role in the objective-setting process for anyone at the local level. Comparison of Washington's plan with similar plans already in use in other states indicates a likelihood of failure. While the law was apparently intended to foster a reconsideration of the direction of education, its actual result will probably be to reduce educators' goals to the realization of legislatively mandated standards. A number of suggestions for improving the program conclude the paper. (Author/PGD)

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THROUGH LEGISLATIVE MANDATE:
THE STATE OF WASHINGTON APPROACH

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Curricular Focus and Change
Through Legislative Mandate:
The State of Washington Approach
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Abstract

A discussion of the State of Washington's newly enacted Learning Objectives Law was presented. Comparison/contrast and discrepancy evaluation were applied in analyzing the theoretical foundations of the Law, the congruence between intent and proposed planning strategies, and in projecting the degree and quality of change in instructional programs offered to learners.

Investigation indicated that both positive and negative aspects were incorporated into the Objectives Law. These were discussed, and suggestions for alteration were made.

CURRICULAR FOCUS AND CHANGE
THROUGH LEGISLATIVE MANDATE:
THE STATE OF WASHINGTON APPROACH

Vincent Doyle[#]

Children ought to be educated, not for the present but for a possibly improved condition of man. In this tenor Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, commences one of his pedagogical discourses.

By contrast, parental and educator vision is present oriented. During the great immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Americanization was the fervent issue. When Sputnik flew into the skies, science and technology rose to the pinnacle. In a generation of unemployment, inflation, and credit crunch, the piper beckons to the fundamentals of "marketable" skills, the basics.

Fundamentalist solutions to complex problems may work, and they may not. They are here, to begin with, if a literary preface may be pilfered. Government's second estate, the legislative, has become enamored, of late, with specifying the essentials of the educational enterprise.

The Student Learning Objectives Law

In the year of the great Bicentennial, the State of Washington acquired an educational consciousness roughly resembling that of its brethren states. The sometimes gods of Mt. Olympus bequeathed to public educators of the Evergreen State the Student Learning Objectives Law (SLO). Not wishing to reinvent the wheel, and certainly succeeding in that respect, the SLO enactment stated:

"Every school district board of directors, being accountable to the citizens within its district as to the education offered to the

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students therein, on or before September 1, 1977, by rule and regulation, shall develop identifying student learning objectives for their district for grades kindergarten through eight in the areas of language arts, reading, and math, and initiate implementation of such program on or before September 1, 1978..."¹

In many ways Washington's SLO law recalls earlier attempts by state at legislated curriculums. Pennsylvania's "Ten Goals of Quality Education",² passed in 1963, possess amazing similarity. That early approach was rudimentary in process: specify goals, measure, and report. The state of Virginia, borrowing from N.A.E.P., incorporated the needs assessment component into its goal identification process. Virginia was also an early proponent of recycling, portraying curriculum revision as a continuum rather than linear progression.

Interpreting Washington's SLO law fell upon the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the state education department. Clarifications of SLO, since the law's passage, by OSPI have shown some knowledge of curriculum development endeavors undertaken by other states. For example, objectives are to be measurable, evaluation should be annual,³ and community involvement in determining goals is necessary. The initial ideal was to provide a state profile of achievement.⁴

In Perspective: Theoretical Considerations And Other States' Experiences

The OSPI guidelines are somewhat reminiscent of the Michigan accountability model.* Both contain state wide goals, performance objectives, and an

*The Michigan model contained six steps:

1. The identification of statewide goals
2. The development of measurable performance objectives to meet those goals.
3. An assessment of student needs for them to meet the objectives
4. An analysis of the instructional delivery system
5. An evaluation of the delivery system
6. Recommendation for change and improvement

evaluative assessment component. Washington has not delved into the analysis of instructional delivery systems, meanings to be attached to learner performance (cause/effect relationships), nor the process of system renewal. Plurality of learning styles will undoubtedly become an issue if traditional evaluation modes yielding traditional socio/cultural results ensue. The meaning attached to individual and statewide profiles, in viewing the effectiveness of educational offerings, is not delineated in the Washington plan. The renewal aspect of the SLO process goes no further than recommending yearly performance assessment.

In detail the sophistication of Washington SLOs is closely akin to the original Maryland Accountability Program. Statewide goals concern the basic skills, local districts determine the actual performance objectives. Assessment is conducted and an annual report is released. The Maryland experience ran into resistance on several fronts. Objections were raised to state level determination of goals, the burden of accountability being borne at the local level, and instrumentation that failed to measure instruction actually rendered in classrooms. Washington has yet settle the instrumentation question, nor to encounter the other two concerns.

A tangent, though important consideration, to the educational enterprise is the school finance matter. The third estates of Washington and New Jersey are a continent apart in views.

New Jersey's Supreme Court, in Robinson vs. Cahill, restructured quite energetically that state's curricular direction. Pursing "thorough and efficient" will keep New Jersey's educators mentally creative for years to come.

No such impetus exists in Washington. Its Supreme Court upheld the property tax system of school finance. In collaboration the State's Legislature recently exacted a Levy Lid Law. As the name implies, local districts are restricted in raising funds through property taxation. In practice most districts will generate few new dollars from property taxes for program maintenance or expansion.

The dollars' constraint becomes more critical when reviewing curricular revitalization from a processes approach. Examining outputs in that macrocosm entails analyzing the theoretical interaction of inputs with processes to produce results. One is reminded of discrepancy models which focus on three broad issues:

- is the money being spent wisely (i.e., accountability)?
- what do interim results indicate about the current mix of processes with inputs (i.e., would alterations within human influence result in better progress toward goal outcomes)? and
- what cause-effect relationships account for the accomplishment of goals, in the long run (i.e., prerequisites of instructional strategy, required resources, appropriate evaluations, student and staff mix, and the like)?

The systematic process approach implies a deeper involvement of person resources than the current Washington proposal. SLO implementation strategies may vary. Districts can adopt program goals and learning objectives, for example, developed by another district; or they may engage in task analysis.

They may employ teacher judgment in assessing student performance and identifying learning gaps; or they may embark on validation procedures which are criterion referenced.⁶

The latitude in selecting implementation strategies is broad. In a state of 219 small school districts (under 2,000 students, each) with limited resources, with a legislature intent on cutting expense, the projection (of this author) favors the adoption/adaption approach to implementation (modifying that which was developed elsewhere). Such practice would hardly be comparable to extensive time, and person involvement commitments of discrepancy evaluation.⁷

Adoption/adaption differs from discrepancy approaches, specifically in the commitment of resources and the largesse of person involvement. Spady⁸ would hypothesize that SLOs are concerned more with student capacities than competencies. Capacities concentrate on an economic, life/role domain. Included in that realm are the development of the three R's. As the specified objectives, SLO basic skills do not permit wide latitudes of implementation/involvement strategies. In a socio/political world one would hope for more participation in curricular decision making.

In a Drucker sense the SLO law attempts to manage that which is easily measured. Basal achievement can be assessed through any number of readily available, evaluative tools. Data are generated rapidly, and the analysis of that which is measured commences.

The issue as to what has been measured will undoubtedly surface. Ideally, SLO should tie locally identified needs, learner objectives, and criterion referenced testing together much as the Michigan attempt. However, local districts do not possess psychometric expertise for criterion referenced test development, as one exigency. Unfortunately, the legislature has not been inclined to provide such resources, either.

In practice the management of change, implementation, is often under-planned. Once innovation is adopted (or prescribed), interest shifts toward monitoring of outcomes. SLO does not proscribe many details for arriving at goal achievement, when viewed from the practitioner's vantage. A handful of curriculum persons (eleven, in total), regionally located, assist districts in SLO planning. An assumption is that implementation occurs more or less as devised. Actual analysis refutes that supposition. Implementation at the user level reflects discrepancies from intended plans.⁹

For studying implementation, Fullan and Pomfret propose a five dimension context: changes in subject matter, structure, role behavior, knowledge and understanding, and values internalization.¹⁰ Subject matter inputs encompass materials utilization, curricular scope and sequence, and the redirection of objectives. Structural influences pertain to the learning environment, spatial and temporal variations, and resources deployment. Role modification embodies the fidelity of implementors' (planned) behavior to new perspectives of involvement, particularly where persons engage in activities different from prior experiences.

Knowledge and understanding, the fourth dimension, concerns users' technical competencies in operationalizing the innovation (e.g. implementing changes in the teaching/learning transaction, or providing effective input in a different involvement role). Value commitment requires both advocacy by implementors, and implementation successes to reinforce the internalization process.

Fullan and Pomfret are proffering a panoramic model for analyzing the effect of the input-process mix on structuring output. Within the context of that model, the Washington SLO approach addresses only the first component, changes in subject matter/curricular focus. From a sociological design,¹¹ chief implementors (local educators, boards and parents) are relegated by SLO to "action level" participation. Their activities concentrate on execution, translation of policy into the classroom process. Formulation of direction, and decisions of what, how, and when, by contrast, constitute the "policy level" of involvement. The Washington Legislature reserved that higher level to itself.

A basic curriculum development tenant has always been that implementors must be involved in decision making, at "policy level", if commitment to change is to be had. More congruence between SLO and change theory would facilitate the likelihood of positive effect accruing to the learner.

Some specific comparisons between Washington's plans and the experiences of other states are of interest. The Michigan approach, despite detailed planning, has encountered a number of criticisms, worthy of note.¹²

First, their common goals were entirely uncontroversial. In the Washington example anyone can support the development of children's reading skills or of manipulative numeric competencies. Such statements are hardly a burning issue. More appropriate would be to include local involvement at the inception level. Implementors (educators, boards and parents) would select goals. Performance objectives could reflect a multitude of domains, and would be based on locally identified, validated needs.

Developing and choosing objectives in Michigan became the task of a few persons, commitment to the project suffered as a result. In permitting adoption/adaption of objectives, Washington is likewise short circuiting interpersonal processes prerequisite for advocacy. Another issue was technical, the delivery capabilities of the on-going evaluation system. SLO has yet to specify, clearly, either analytical means (tests, rating scales, observations, whatever) or modes (criterion or norm referenced). Another concern, Michigan tied money to results. Washington is simply not providing any. The analogy is that of Moses rapping a mirage rock with an imaginary cane for sustenance in the Sinai. Finally, Michigan published student performances, district by district, an incident sure to invite comparison, controversy and misinterpretation. Washington's OSPI already documents achievement scores in similar publications, and can be expected to continue with SLO. The sport's page, box score, reporting technique is a certain zero-sum tactic. Regardless of performance, some districts always come out winners, and an equal number are portrayed as losers.

Suggestions For Improving The Process

As affirmations of society's intent toward future existence, schools are both product and producer of an American ethos. They function to yield skilled person-power and to instill behaviors necessary for living harmoniously with one's neighbors.

The concern for the institution's accountability remains somewhat perplexing. Schools have always been accountable to their public, the taxpayers. Consider the property tax levy or the school board meeting, democracy at its most fundamental. Perhaps the real issue concerns the redefinition of schooling's purposes, that is, costs and rewards in terms of human needs. Not only is the form of revitalization under scrutiny, but the vehicle of redefinition is as evolving as the product. Influences from culture at large, community norms, public perceptions of these forces, and the institution's flexibility are all responsible for the respecification of learner end-product.

In respect to Washington's SLO legislation, the confusion between dissemination and implementation begs further redress. Dissemination is an information rendering process. Implementation involves affecting change. Undoubtedly, the SLO goal was to reconsider the direction of education. Sadly, the outcome was completely product defined mandate, pursuit of legislated educational goals.

Emphasizing how to revitalize, rather than what to pursue, would be more aligned to a process-centered approach. Some suggestions toward this end, for the SLO endeavor, would include:

1. creating an action plan within the local district which defines processes to be engaged in, and participation levels of all groups (e.g. administrators, parents, staff, state department), in the reanalysis of curricular offerings. To insure broad base involvement of all groups, OSPI would sign off on the action plan before additional activities were undertaken. By sanctioning the local district's planned endeavors, OSPI would be committing their support and resources to its success.
2. list, then engage in activities which identify learner need based on fact (observable, measurable, and repeatable) prior to specification of solutions (e.g. emphasis on basic skills) or the determination of necessary resources.
3. specify, then embark upon task analysis which de-emphasizes win/lose confrontation, but demands consensus (and involvement) of publics in determining objectives to be pursued. Objectives must be supportable by validated learner needs.
4. implement problem solving/decision making apparatus---in identifying needs, prioritizing objectives, and selecting solutions--- by those persons nearest to, and immediately responsible for the situation's redress. Define the membership of decision making bodies to include broad representation and equality of input by respective groups.

5. define and implement solutions both in terms of goals and resources necessary for accomplishment. Goals must reflect not only solutions to remediate learner need, but education across three domains. Resource encumbrance must contain frank appraisal of both LEAs and state office responsibility to learners, in terms of implementation efficiency and revenue base. Face-to-face negotiation between LEA and OSPI is probable. Final determination of who contributes what, and how much must rest on learner need and fiscal analysis.
6. design and operationalize a flexible management information system with sufficient computer and consultant resources to provide pertinent, usable data for decision making. Information generation and synthesis should include the level inputs, qualitative measures of the implementation processes, and both formative and summative output analyses. Operationally, technicians should concentrate on the variable components of curriculum: inputs controllable by schools, and the quality of processes involvement.
7. create and implement a recycling component. Use formative analysis to pursue congruence between derived output and planned goals. Employ summative analysis as the initial step to reidentification of learner needs.
8. develop and adhere to a non-threatening report system for disseminating information. Address issues within an assessment/diagnosis/remediation framework. Do not link achievement of goals to evaluation of leadership or quality of instruction (those behaviors need to be assessed as fidelity to processes and plans).

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